

EXHIBIT L

RESIDENTS DISCUSS PRIORITIES

Billings, the largest city in Montana, successfully used a small group process (sometimes referred to a "nominal group process") to involve the general public in developing a capital improvements plan. Below is an article from the *Billings Gazette* describing the process they used. It is reprinted with permission of the *Billings Gazette*.

If our largest city can accomplish real citizen participation in the process of prioritizing needed public facility improvements, any Montana can use this tool to involve their citizens in a community planning process. See also Exhibit A, page A-6, for more information on the "nominal group process."

"Residents Discuss Billings Priorities"

by BECKY SHAY of the Gazette Staff

More than 100 Billings residents spent Thursday evening setting priorities for the city's capital improvement plan.

Their work was to take a myriad of ideas, from citywide water line improvements to using schools for branch libraries, and help city leaders decide which are most important and feasible for funding. The meeting is a beginning to an annual update of the city's five-year capital improvement plan, which sets priorities for all purchases and projects that cost more than \$25,000.

Participants broke into six groups to tackle the categorized wish lists. When people entered the meeting, they were randomly given numbers, 1 through 6, which corresponded with the groups in which they would later participate. The system was aimed at splitting up majority power for special interests within each category. Each group was assigned a city staff member who provided technical information.

The groups' styles were as divergent as their topics; some discussed and eliminated topics, others went around the table, and members announced projects that they thought should receive priority, another posted paper on the wall and worked to lump the variety of specific projects into broader classes.

One group discussed the merits of eliminating the school sidewalk program. Under the program, the city has allotted \$345,000 a year for the next three fiscal years to develop sidewalk routes to schools.

Connie Wardell spoke against the program and said the last round of improvements paved routes to Rimrock School, which is now closed. But Shauna Kerr said the program is worthwhile because some schools still need safe access, including McKinley School. In a vote, the group was split among those who would like to reduce or eliminate the program's funding and those who want it maintained. It's an issue they agreed to come back to.

At the end of the more than two-hour meeting, the groups seemed to have been productive,

although their priority lists won't be presented until they meet again on Sept. 27. That meeting begins at 6:30 p.m. at the Billings Community Center, 360 N. 23rd St.

Barbara Berreth's group didn't discuss her favorite project, Cobb Field, but Berreth said the meeting was worthwhile and she looks forward to the city taking residents' input.

And that is exactly what City Administrator Dennis Taylor wanted from the meeting. Citizen input helps ensure good fiscal spending, he said.

"I'm confident we'll not only get things done, we'll get the right things done," Taylor said.

Sandy Fischer is a planning and design consultant and came to see what community projects were being suggested. She joined the meeting and was chosen as the leader of her group. Figuring out how the city funds projects slightly stifled the group's work, but the city staff helped iron out the confusion, she said.

"One benefit of the process is we all got a little education on city funding," she said.

Fischer said the meeting was encouraging, even though it was too short to allow people to fully understand the projects and the capital improvement plan. Regardless, she said, the top projects all seemed to benefit the overall Billings community, rather than select neighborhoods.

That could be because of the varied turnout, which Taylor said included the "breadth and depth" of the Billings population.

"I'm excited about the vitality of the participants," he said. "They are energized, talking and working together. Last year we had hands full of people and they were dubious that their input would be valued and engaged. We're making progress toward the development of the annual five-year capital improvement plan being a citizens' process."

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